Women in Model Railroading

by Gail Allen Komar MMR®

I can still hear my mother, "Don't play with your brother's trains!"

My brother Jim was only allowed to set up his Lionel trains in the basement from Thanksgiving until New Year's Day. I watched my 9-year-older brother with intense fascination as he drew a track plan that would fit on a pingpong table and a couple of other tables. I watched as he put the track sections, turnouts, rolling stock, and structures together that would become the layout. The growing anticipation of when track power would be connected to the massive control box that would move the locomotives was overwhelming.

Little did my brother realize that I memorized exactly not only how to run the trains, but also where every car and locomotive was spotted. When he was not home, I would sneak down to the basement and run the trains to my absolute delight. Afterward, I put everything back exactly as I had found it. It was not until I had kids of my own that I finally confessed to him of my deeds.

Growing up outside Philadelphia, I was exposed to prototype trains. My grandparents lived one block from the four-track Pennsylvania Railroad main line with commuter trains and big GG-1 locomotives zooming by. How wonderful! After high school, I joined the rush hour crowd and commuted to work on the Media Line daily into downtown Philly.

When I met my late husband Ross Allen, I realized very quickly that he was a "train nut." His invitation to come back to his place to see his trains did not mean what I initially thought it meant. He did, indeed, have a very large N-scale layout, but without any structures. After we married, I found that I enjoyed assembling and painting buildings. Then I tried, and succeeded, in scratchbuilding structures for the NTRAK modules we built.

The year 1983 was a big change for us. We built an addition to our home to hold our future HO-scale layout called the West Virginia Northern. Ross was very adamant that this was going to be a joint project, and I was a full partner. We shared lots of the work, but Ross would do the benchwork, trackwork, electrical wiring, and overhead lighting. I would do all the scenery, structures, rolling stock, and handle operating sessions. The WVN was cutting edge for its time, operating with a dispatcher, telephone headsets, and early digital control of engines.

In 1990, there was another big change for us. We started RAILSERVE, a custom model railroad business. Model railroading was not a hobby anymore. It was now a business. It was not easy to manage a relationship in a marriage as well as in a business situation, but we did it with the same understanding that each of us contributes equally. We built and installed many fabulous model railroads all over the United States. We collaborated on the layout designs so that the track plans and scenery worked together, both functionally and artistically. I did scenery of the Rockies, rolling hillsides of the Midwest, Appalachian Mountains, city scenes, and bridges/water in the Florida Keys. The HO-scale Florida East Coast layout was highlighted in Allen Keller Productions *Great Model Railroads, Vol. 41.*

I have been a member of the NMRA since 1973, attending many Sunshine Region meets, several National Conventions, and for the last 19 years, Prototype Rails in Cocoa Beach, Florida. I have presented so many clinics over the years that I have lost count. The opportunity to share my experience and techniques, and, in turn, to be inspired by other clinician presentations cannot be overstated. I encourage everyone to join and participate in NMRA activities to improve your modeling skills. It was no surprise that I became involved in the Master Model Railroader program. I was well on my way to becoming the first woman MMR, but RAILSERVE slowed me down because the business came first. I did become MMR No. 349 in 2005.

An article on the WVN was scheduled to be published in *Model Railroader* Magazine in 2002 but was delayed until June 2005 because of the unexpected death of Ross in 2002. His death turned my world upside down. I was not sure what the next chapter of my life was going to be. What would become of the West Virginia Northern? Would I marry again and to whom? Maybe someone in my sailboat racing circle or diving buddies? I was not sure I wanted to marry another model railroader.

I married Greg Komar in 2004, and, yes, he is a model railroader. I wondered about my sanity. Why would I do that again? I was married for 30 wonderful years to Ross who lived and thought almost all the time about trains. However, the truth comes out when I make myself realize that, believe it or not, I'm also a "train nut."

Greg and I have traveled around the country riding and watching trains. When approaching a railroad crossing, we always hope the gates will go down so that we can see the train pass. For the last 15 years, I have been a member of Largo Central Railroad, a live steam club, so I even get to drive and ride model trains!

Greg helped me move the WVN (which was so much a part of my life) to our home in Tampa, Florida. After building a 30x35-foot addition, and with a lot of help from 54 friends, we moved the very large pieces of the WVN to our home. Now it was up to us to reassemble the WVN. Greg built new lighting over the layout, created photo backdrops, handled locomotive painting, custom WVN lettering, and sound decoder installations. I removed all the original wiring under the layout and rewired the layout to current best practices to support DCC and sound decoders. I developed a new skill set by handlaying Code 83, 70, and 55 rail and scratchbuilding six turnouts for a new 5-foot addition to the original layout. After doing six turnouts, building another 60 was no big deal, and it was needed for a new double-ended three-level staging area.

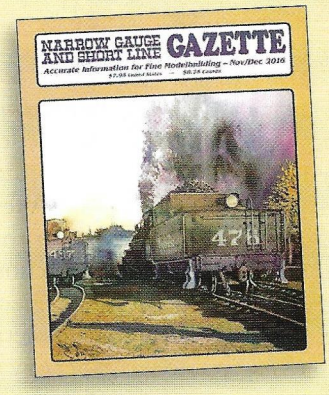
Together we've enjoyed opening "our'" railroad to Special Interest Groups, visitors from the 2017 NMRA National Convention, and most especially to our many good friends who join us regularly for operating sessions. It continues to be a thrill to watch new visitors go dumbstruck for a few moments when first entering the railroad room.

If the WVN had not been moved, a new generation of model railroaders might not have been introduced to model rail-

roading. My grandson Ben, now 12 years old, usually gives us a quick hug when visiting, then makes a beeline to the train room, where he joyfully disappears for hours at a time. During the "reconstruction," he became a very valuable "quality control expert" as he ran trains over all the trackwork to see if everything worked. As the years have gone by, his questions have moved from how to operate it, to spending time under the layout, looking, studying, and asking questions of what makes it work.

When I reflect on the history of the West Virginia Northern, I could have never imagined what transpired. I am reminded how fortunate I am to have been able to share such a wonderfully diverse and rewarding hobby as model railroading with my first husband, Ross. And now years later, I am blessed yet again to share that passion with Greg. There are so few husband-and-wife teams in this hobby today. How lucky we both are, indeed.

NARROW GAUGE AND SHORT LINE GAZETTE



Narrow Gauge and Short Line Gazette *is packed with how-to articles and features of interest to model railroaders. High quality photographs accompany feature articles of model railroad layouts each month. Presenting accurate information for fine model building since 1975, the* **Gazette** *is your resource for narrow gauge layouts, projects, and plans.*

ONE YEAR, SIX ISSUES
$40.00 in U.S.
CANADA $45.00
INTERNATIONAL $55.00

Subscribe today at ngslgazette.com

WHITE RIVER PRODUCTIONS
Toll-free (877) 787-2467 • Overseas (660) 695-4433
P.O. Box 48, Bucklin, MO 64631 • info@WhiteRiverProductions.com

Photo by Greg Komar